

Study Guide #6: Is the New Testament Authentic?

Introduction

The only way to evaluate whether or not Jesus is God is to first examine the New Testament documents as to their (1) authenticity and (2) reliability as historical documents. Then, if they prove to be reliable historical documents, one would have to see if Jesus Himself ever actually claimed to be God. If He did make that claim, then one would have to evaluate that claim on the basis of logic and history. By authenticity, historians refer to whether a written document in our possession today accurately reflects the contents of the original document. This Study Guide evaluates the authenticity of the New Testament.

Question #1: What is the first step that historians take to determine the authenticity of ancient documents?

Answer: Ancient manuscripts are all handwritten documents because they were written before the invention of the printing press. Historians first seek to determine the likely time frame in which the original documents were written. This step is necessary because it's almost universally believed that it takes 150-200 years after the events before legendary, fictional material creeps into it. Therefore, if it can be demonstrated that the New Testament documents were originally written not in excess of 150 years or so after the events, then historians can check all the discovered copies to determine if significant changes (called variants) have occurred. The more manuscript copies we have, the easier it is to determine if significant changes have been made. This entire test is called the bibliographical test. Thus, if the evidence (a) shows that the original documents were written within approximately 150 years or so of the events they describe, and (b) shows no significant changes have been made to the text over the years, then such a document passes the bibliographical test.



Ancient Manuscript

Question #2: Don't you have to accept the New Testament as inspired by God in order to authenticate it?

Answer: No. One's view of inspiration has no bearing on the bibliographical test of a document's authenticity. Inspiration is a completely separate issue. The bibliographical test is something historians apply to all ancient documents, whether religious or not.

Question #3: Christians assume that the New Testament documents were written in the 1st century A.D. But modern scholars date virtually all of them to the second half of the 2nd century instead. How do you reconcile those dates?

Answer: Liberal scholars who date the New Testament books to the late 2nd century have been influenced by the Enlightenment, a movement in the 17th and 18th centuries founded on the principle that only *natural* explanations exist for anything. Thus, such scholars are automatically skeptical of the history recorded in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures and of its supernatural emphasis on God's intervention in history. With that bias, liberal Christian scholars usually say that Jesus, for example, never worked miracles or claimed to be God, but that these things were added by later Christian writers. To account for this, they must claim that the New Testament was written in the late 2nd century so that they can argue that there was sufficient time for legendary, fictional elements to enter into the written story of Jesus. These scholars start with the *assumption* that the New Testament cannot possibly be true; therefore, its books must have been written at a later time. We believe in the method used by historians—allow the *evidence* to date the documents.

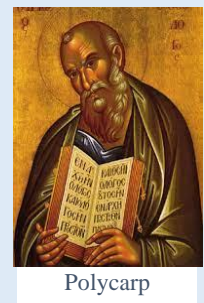
Question #4: What evidence exists for a 1st-century New Testament creation?

Answer: There is both external and internal evidence for this conclusion. In our answer here, we outline the important external evidence. There are several manuscripts dated without significant controversy to the early 2nd century that quote from 18 of the 27 books of the New Testament. For these documents to have so widely quoted most of the New Testament early in the 2nd century is strong evidence that those books must have been written in the 1st century. For your interest, we outline this evidence below:

Estimated Date of About A.D. 100—*The Epistle of Barnabas*, probably written in Alexandria, Egypt; *The Didache* (or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), probably produced either in Syria or Palestine; and a letter sent to the church at Corinth, Greece about A.D. 96 by Clement, bishop of Rome. Among these 3 sources, there are quotations and paraphrases from at least 10 New Testament books, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, I Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, and I Peter.

Estimated Date of A.D. 115—Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, Syria, wrote several letters to different churches as he journeyed to his martyrdom in Rome. His letters refer to at least 11 New Testament books, including Matthew, John, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, I and II Timothy, and Titus.

Estimated Date of A.D. 120—Polycarp, a personal disciple of the apostle John, wrote a letter to the church at Philippi and quoted from at least 16 New Testament books, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Hebrews, I Peter, and I John.



Polycarp

Question #5: What is the internal evidence that demonstrates the 1st-century origin of the New Testament books?

Answer: There is a very early and uncontested Christian tradition among the early Christian writers that the apostles Paul and Peter were both executed by Emperor Nero in the A.D. 60s. Since there is also an uncontested tradition that Paul wrote at least 13 New Testament books and that Peter wrote the two that bear his name (I and II Peter), that means that 15 of the 27 books must have been written before A.D. 70.

Question #6: Okay, but what internal evidence is there for the other 12 books?

Answer: The book of Acts is one of the remaining lynchpins for the 1st-century origin of the New Testament. It records the death of Stephen, one of the first deacons in the Church (Acts 7:54-60), and of the apostle James (Acts 12:1-2), the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, who we know was killed in A.D. 61 or 62. Yet it seems odd that it doesn't say anything about the execution of Paul by Nero in the 60s, despite the fact that Paul was one of the central figures in the book of Acts. Instead, the book ends with Paul sitting in a Roman prison. Furthermore, it says nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans. The most logical explanation for these omissions is that Acts was written before these events.



Luke

When you compare the introductions in the books of Luke and Acts (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3), we find they were both written by the same person to a man named Theophilus and that Luke was written before Acts. As for the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they all record Jesus' words predicting the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which happened in A.D. 70 (Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-3; Luke 21:5-6). But they say nothing about its actual destruction. The most likely explanation is that they were all written before that event.

Although there is some doubt about who wrote the book of Hebrews, clearly the purpose of the book was to wean Hebrew (Jewish) Christians off the Jerusalem Temple with its earthly priesthood, animal sacrifices, and services. This is obvious from even a cursory reading of the book. Instead, the writer tries to focus his readers' attention on the sanctuary in heaven, Jesus as our only priest and High Priest, to His sacrificial death, and to His blood. This obvious effort on the part of the writer presupposes that the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing. Therefore, the book of Hebrews must have been written before A.D. 70.

[NOTE: Of the remaining 7 books, please remember that under Question #4, John and I John were quoted by or before A.D. 120. Also, given the historical evidence for the probable authors of James, Jude, and II and III John and Revelation, those books were probably also written by or before the close of the 1st century A.D. Therefore, no reputable historian who studies this evidence has any problem concluding that the New Testament books were originally written in the 1st-century A.D.]

Question #7: How are ancient manuscripts dated?

Answer: There are 4 basic methods to determine the approximate age of a manuscript. *First*, there is an analysis of the composition of the ink used. *Second*, the style of writing the letters is important. *Third*, the type of material on which the manuscript was written is also an important clue for its date. Note that paper made from wood pulp was not used in Western civilization until it was introduced by the Chinese in the 13th century A.D. (the 1200s). Prior to this time, papyrus, made from a reed grown in Egypt, was commonly used in the earliest times. Later came parchment, which was an animal skin that was scraped and dried under some tension—usually from a cow, sheep, or goat. Later, a more refined animal skin known as vellum was introduced, which was parchment that was bleached and treated with lime or chalk to make it easier to write on. Finally, all of these writing materials are from organic sources and can be approximately dated since the early 1950s using the Carbon-14 method.

Question #8: How old are the oldest discovered manuscripts of the New Testament documents?

Answer: The 3 oldest and most complete manuscripts of the New Testament date to the early to mid-4th century A.D. (the 300s: the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus) and to the 5th century A.D. (the 400s: the Codex Alexandrinus). The Codex Vaticanus contains all of the Old Testament except for most of Genesis and the New Testament from the 4 gospels through part of Hebrews. The Codex Sinaiticus contains more than half of the Old Testament and nearly all of the New Testament. The oldest fragment of a New Testament manuscript is part of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, dated to about A.D. 125. [NOTE: A codex refers to a book format rather than to a scroll.]



Codex Sinaiticus

Question #9: How do we know that the original documents were not altered in significant ways since the earliest manuscript copies are at least 250 years after the originals were written?

Answer: *First*, it's only the earliest most *complete* manuscripts of the entire New Testament that are approximately 250 years after the original documents were written. However, numerous (a) earlier fragments or other portions of the New Testament and (b) quotations from these books found in many different Christian writings in the period from the very late 1st century, early 2nd century, and in the 3rd century also exist. *Second*, these fragments and quotations can be checked with each other and with later manuscript copies to determine if significant changes were made in the later manuscripts. Nothing affecting a major teaching has been discovered. This gives the historian reasonable evidence to conclude that there were no major doctrinal changes made from the original documents in the later manuscripts.

Question #10: How does the manuscript evidence for the New Testament compare to other ancient historical documents in terms of the length of time from the events to the written documents that describe those events?

Answer: The earliest manuscripts of *The Illiad* date to about 400 years after the 8th-century B.C., the traditional century for Homer's life (Homer wrote it). The oldest known manuscripts for Demosthenes' speeches date some 1,400 years after he lived. For Livy's *History of Rome*, the oldest fragment is dated to about 400 years after he probably wrote it, with the 19 complete manuscript copies dating to about 1,000 years after the original. Tacitus' *Annals*' oldest discovered manuscripts date approximately 1,000 years after his time. Finally, the oldest known manuscript of Julius Caesar's *History of the Gallic Wars* is dated to about 1,000 years from the time it was originally written. You can see that the evidence regarding the New Testament documents is much greater than for any other ancient documents known to scholars.

Question #11: What is the evidence regarding the total number of known manuscript copies of the New Testament documents compared to other ancient documents?

Answer: We have discovered nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts of fragments or of whole portions of New Testament documents in libraries, monasteries, and museums. There are also between 8,000 and 10,000



Ancient Manuscripts

manuscripts of Latin Vulgate documents, the 4th-century Latin translations of the Greek New Testament. In addition, there are approximately 9,000 other manuscripts (in other languages) of those documents. This means that scholars have approximately 24,000 manuscripts of New Testament documents available for study.

When that number is compared to the known manuscripts of other ancient documents, we have an extraordinary number of New Testament manuscripts. For example, there are only 5 ancient written works for which we have 10 or more available manuscripts. They are as follows:

- *The Illiad*—643 manuscripts
- Speeches of Demosthenes—200 manuscripts
- Tacitus' *Annals*—20 manuscripts
- Livy's *History of Rome*—20 manuscripts
- Julius Caesar's *History of the Gallic Wars*—10 manuscripts

Question #12: I have read that there are thousands of copyist errors among the New Testament manuscripts. If that is true, how can you be certain that the New Testament documents that we have are authentic?

Answer: The way manuscript scholars count errors or discrepancies (also called variants) is to take the total number discovered among the thousands of manuscripts that we have available for study. In most cases, the very same error is repeated hundreds of times. Therefore, it's reported as hundreds of errors. So it is quite misleading to say that the New Testament documents are full of different errors. Of course, when you have scribes copying manuscripts by hand, there are bound to be copyist errors. But most of the mistakes among these documents are quite small and do not jeopardize any teaching of those documents. Most experts estimate that the textual variants (different readings) only represent about 15 percent of the entire New Testament. And that percentage includes the presence or absence of the definite article (*the*), different spellings, different word order, and similar small variants.

Given all the evidence outlined in this Study Guide, the New Testament manuscripts pass the bibliographical test. We can, therefore, safely conclude that we have the authentic New Testament as it was essentially written in the original documents.